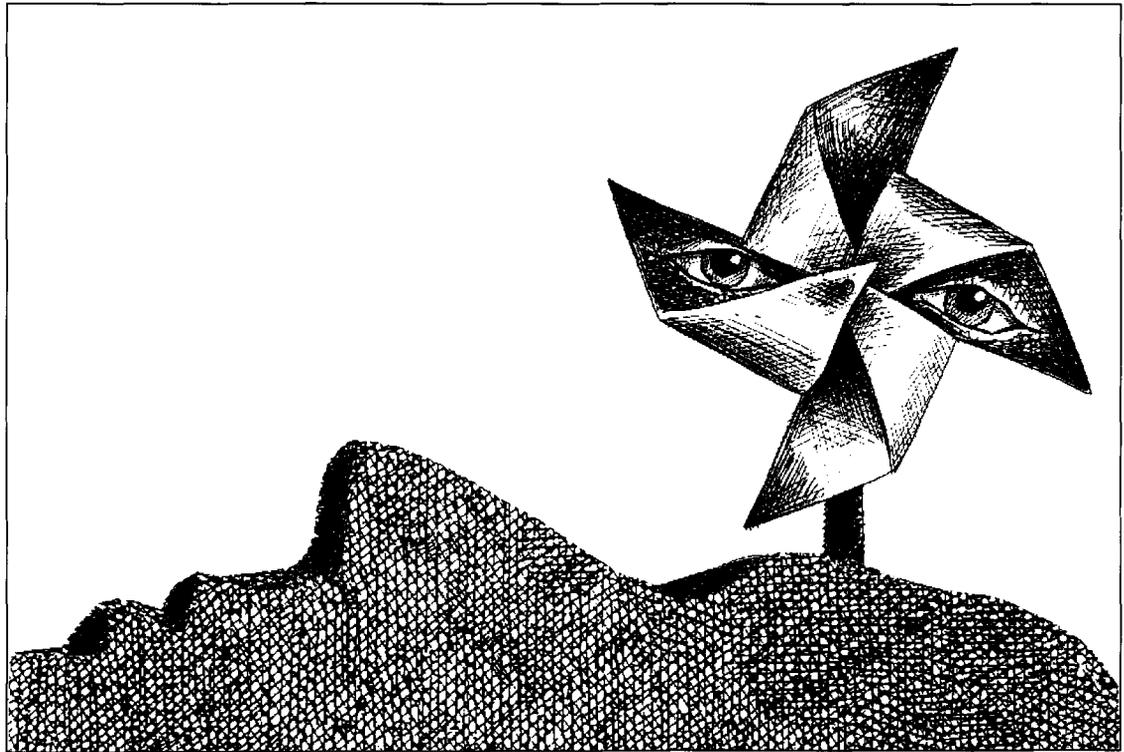


The Revolt of the Nonvoter

by Donald Warren



Igor Kopehinsky

On November 3, 1992, the most surprising news will not be who has won the presidential election, but whether a majority of the 186 million Americans eligible to do so will have voted. The salient question today is whether a moiety promises to become a majority. Four years ago they barely missed the honor: 49.84 percent were nonvoters, with some 91 million forming their ranks. Then as now, the mass media will have failed to report the biggest scoop of recent presidential campaigns: the empty voting booth.

Thus far, this election year has been most remarkable for the citizen boycott of the lengthy and extravagant sideshow known as the presidential primaries. Case in point: New York state, where Bill Clinton attracted less than three percent of eligible voters; the supposedly crucial contests of last spring in Illinois, Michigan, and then California that enticed less than one in six to cast a vote for candidates Bush, Buchanan, Brown, Clinton, or Tsongas. All told, across 27 states, voting levels declined from 24 percent in 1988 to just above 15 percent this year.

The groundswell of apparent disinterest and disdain for the election process, already evident with the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 (when 62.8 percent of the electorate par-

anticipated), has increased steadily over the seven subsequent presidential elections. In the last presidential contest, while 5.2 million persons were added to the ranks of voters since 1984, 9.2 million chose the ranks of nonvoters. Between 1968 and 1988, the group choosing not to vote in presidential elections more than doubled, increasing by over 44 million persons; in the same period, voters increased by only 19 million. Our nation's most recent presidential contest between George Bush and Michael Dukakis was particularly memorable for the fact that it resulted in an event not seen in this century: a *decline in the absolute number of voters* compared to the previous quadri-annual campaign. This uninspired pairing lured 81 million persons to the voting booth compared to 83 million in the Reagan-Mondale match-up. This, despite the fact that the number of *potential* members of the electorate increased during the four-year interval by eight million!

Yet the major parties continue to focus on conversion, rather than recruitment. "Getting the vote out" is, of course, a noble sentiment in theory, but one which in practice means persuading supporters of the other side to switch. For Democrats, this has traditionally meant those at the bottom of the social structure, and for Republicans the call rests on an identification with the prospects of upward social mobility regardless of one's present station in life. Still, it seems evident that neither major party wishes to foster or endorse a revolt of

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the deeply disaffected or alienated majority found among the ranks of the nonvoters. While seeking the restoration of “middle class” allegiance to their party, Democrats do not wish to expend their resources on the recruitment of the apathetic or disaffected, but simply on those whose past allegiance and present discontent with the incumbent will encourage them to jump ship. Republicans, likewise, who have relied heavily upon the independent voter and the renegade Democrat, must now attempt to preserve the loyalty of these most doubtful battalions.

Clearly, despite lip service to the contrary, nonvoters are a remarkably neglected “interest group” seen by the two major political parties (and even by those measuring the political pulse of the nation) as too costly to reach or even track. With a handful of academic exceptions, these millions remain an enigma refusing to be confined to the neat tabular boxes of pollsters, nor even entered into the mathematical equations and intuitive prognostications that fill the pages and soundbites of the mass media. Far from being apathetic or indifferent, their disengagement from the process and institutions of American politics provides both a window and a mirror by which we can peer beyond the ritual of conformity (which for many is the essence of voting) and examine what is perhaps a more genuine expression of the often invoked “will of the majority.”

Who are these nonvoters? They are depicted in the mass media with the broad brushstrokes of social rejectionism and ill-repute usually reserved for a despised ethnic group. The readily conjured images include that of anti-establishment youth yearning for a 1960’s style rebellion (actually, indifference fits the reality more accurately); urban minorities and the poor denied access to the voting booth by restrictive registration rules (in fact, registration and voting has risen for minorities); or the politically illiterate *Boobicus Americanus* of a Mencken-like cultural mediocrity. In reality, with each passing election, nonvoters are increasingly composed of white, middle-aged, and middle-income persons who have an increasing likelihood of having a college education.

In the last three presidential elections, nonvoters age 18 to 24 have outnumbered voters by a ratio of two to one. A major explanation, certainly not a startling one, is that young adults have a remarkably low commitment to civic culture and are particularly unlikely to be voters when they lack college education. For this portion of the nonvoting population, however, it is not revolution and rebellion that is central, but their own lifestyle of detachment from the polity and preoccupation with consumerism that explains their membership in the non-voting interest (or “disinterest”) group.

Political theorists and researchers have not quite decided whether the remarkably low turnout rates in America compared to those in Canada or Western Europe are reason for celebration or alarm. Strong advocates are to be found on both sides of the question. There is even a school of thought in political science which suggests that it does not really matter, as voters and nonvoters tend to have quite similar ideological and candidate preferences. And, more intriguingly, some in the groves of the academy are debating which is more rational: voting or nonvoting.

It would appear to be a virtual truism of common sense, if not of political theory, that the quality of voters determines the

strength of a democratic society. But, in fact, this issue is also a controversial one among political scientists. It turns out that measuring a person’s knowledge of politics and issues is far from a simple task. Merely asking people the names of officeholders from the President to the Secretary of State does not indicate how well a person can evaluate policy issues. Flawed as it might be, the simplest measure of “political sophistication” is the level of formal education.

Those who are disturbed by the lack of a clear social superiority among voters versus nonvoters ascribe such developments to the decline in the quality of candidates and the numbing triviality of current political debate. Lest such a view be deemed “elitist,” one should bear in mind that from one-quarter to one-third of all voters in primaries and presidential elections make up their minds within the last few days of any campaign.

There are two interest groups that are quite delighted with the findings that voters and nonvoters are looking increasingly alike: political operatives and pollsters. As to the first group, their professional instincts do not dictate the conversion of new voters—either first time youth or those who are habitual nonvoters—yet both types of individuals are unlikely to be recruited in even the most intense and exciting political campaigns. Instead, the efforts of the political pros are directed at the “swing vote”—what one commentator called the “intense battle for the middle.” Simply put, it is far more efficient to gain a supporter who simultaneously is lost to the opposition than it is for either side to swell their ranks.

Pollsters view the growing similarity between voters and nonvoters as a self-serving rationalization based on professional aggrandizement. Over the past several decades both the cost and efficiency of survey research regarding all topics, but certainly political preferences and attitudes in particular, have suffered from “methodological” problems. The very saturation of the public by commercial and “scientific” surveys has led to a kind of “revolt of the respondent”: in larger numbers people are refusing to be interviewed or are lying to pollsters.

It is membership in a community and a sense of belonging (especially to local neighborhood and family structures) that is now seen as critical to who does or does not vote. Empirical studies suggest several definitive measures of individual attachment, rather than the hypothetical abstractions such as “sense of community” or “civic culture” that many political theorists cite as essential to political involvement.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, academic surveys could be readily assured of 65 to 85 percent cooperation in any sampling effort. Now, with the declining trust Americans manifest in all bureaucratic structures, response rates of 45 to 55 percent are

the best that can be achieved. Commercial exploitation of the term “research” no doubt adds to the general climate in which people have increasingly resisted being accomplices in what are perceived as the manipulative efforts of “superpollsters”—Harris, Gallup, etc. There are a variety of explanations for this, ranging from a greater reliance on telephone versus in-person interviews, the need to probe attitudes more carefully, to the discovery of inherent biases in the survey interview itself, all of which have lowered the credibility of such undertakings. The presumption that nonvoters are virtual twins of their voting counterparts strengthens the presumed validity of surveys that rely on “likely voters,” such as telephone surveys and smaller-scale samplings that reduce costs.

Within the limited confines of our discussion, we cannot fully assay the welter of empirical studies of voting “behavior,” but merely allude to some of the *implications* that the increase in nonvoting has generated. In the main, the alarm over turnout decline centers on two arguments. First, that informed, motivated, and concerned citizens find the state of the political system such that participation in it is futile; the electorate is not at fault, the system is. A second argument is that the quality of voters has declined relative to the quality of nonvoters. Granted the former view of “dropouts” from a failed political system, this development is seen as a danger, since worthy citizens abdicate their positions to an equal mass of unworthy citizens. For example, many voters who enter election campaigns at the last moment are lacking in basic knowledge (are “unsophisticated”—a large majority cannot identify the Secretary of State or does not know whether England is a monarchy or a democracy), and thus respond readily to the glitzy manipulative ads and media-created images of candidates rather than forming thoughtful evaluations based on careful examination of facts and policy positions.

To blame the electorate for the quality of political candidates or campaigns is to suggest that historically higher levels of voting reflected more than the role of urban party machines that, by honest and dishonest means, “delivered” votes. One might reasonably assert that the higher expectations of the contemporary era call for more thoughtful and discriminating actions on the part of voters, which in turn imply a higher level of independence from party control. In fact, these are the trends precisely in evidence over the past three decades.

A major explanation for the decline in voting and the subsequent rise in nonvoting is the failure of either the Democratic or the Republican parties to sustain the kind of intergenerational loyalty that characterized so much of earlier American political culture. Since the first election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, the past four decades have witnessed a growing number of persons eschewing a singular or consistent partisan identity. If party allegiance is seen as the focal dynamic of American politics, then it follows that the growing number of voters who may temporarily float and then shift to the other party become the group that provides the object of election campaigns and, perforce, the “vital center” of U. S. democracy. What is posited as the pattern of shift involves “disengagement” (meaning a lowered voting level) followed by attachment to the new party, which is known as “realignment.” Accordingly, in 1968, many Democrats sat out that year’s election; there were 12 million less Democratic voters compared to 1964. In the intervening 24 years, the Democrats have failed to regain the lost voters.

A rationale for continued party allegiance is that society

demands—even more than intelligent participation—social order. In this view, voting is a social ritual that symbolizes the individual’s membership and entitlement in the social arrangements, including those services and markets that form the essential elements of a viable society. Nonvoting in this view is discouraged but tacitly accepted as the price of a stable, middle-of-the-road existence.

Any discussion of nonvoting would be hopelessly muddled if some sharp differentiation were not made between persons who consciously choose not to select a candidate among those available because of the particulars of policy, personality, or power that the act of voting may entail and those persons who are indifferent to the political system by virtue of their lifestyle or lack of civic commitment. We shall use the terms “principled abstainers” for the former and “apathetics” for the latter.

By “principled,” we adopt the aphorism provided us by Lord Acton: “A principle is a rule of inaction giving valid reason for not doing in a specific instance, what to unprincipled instinct, would seem to be right.” Accordingly, to act without careful forethought is not the epitome of citizenship, especially when choosing not to act may be a more meaningful event in terms of the health of the body politic. Following this definition, many voters are acting out of knee-jerk partisanship, last-minute “selling” by the mass media, or simply the social conformity that calls for voting as a response to bandwagon fashion-consciousness.

In the political science literature on voter turnout, “apathy” and “principled abstention” are frequently intertwined. Thus, one researcher on “Apathy in America,” writes that “from 1964 to 1984, Americans who were both apathetic and convinced they had little or no clout in the political process abstained from voting.” Subsequent to this assertion, the author recognizes that he is dealing with two differing phenomena: “the numbers of both the indifferent and the politically ineffectual swelled after 1964.”

Yet, the most extensive effort to identify and describe nonvoting in more than quantitative terms is Arthur Hadley’s *The Empty Polling Booth*, focusing upon the 1976 presidential election. In speaking of “positive apathetics,” Hadley says their demographics match voters while their attitudes differ, that they are nevertheless “as happy as voters.” Hadley concludes that such nonvoters feel more politically powerful than voters since, “at present their lives are too full for the act of voting to seem important.” Affluent and satisfied for the moment, these individuals vote in large numbers only if their present pleasures are threatened, when “they will react like any sleeping giant goaded awake.”

A critical question, therefore, is whether the increasing number of nonvoters reflects growing apathy or a failure of the political system to respond to the requirements of an increasingly sophisticated and demanding electorate. Hadley notes that while most nonvoters are in the “apathetic” category, a significant minority of the nonvoters pay close attention to politics and are highly critical. He cites former supporters of George Wallace as precisely this type of nonvoter. (My own tabulations indicate that states with the highest Wallace vote in 1968 had the highest nonvoter percentages in the presidential election of 1988.)

Evidence regarding the growth of the “principled abstainer” nonvoter might well be discerned using two yardsticks. First,

if nonvoters are registered, their nonvoting takes on a more activist stance than if otherwise. Although the absolute levels of reported voting and reported registration are both inflated in surveys, these figures themselves are misleading. One can, however, reasonably use the discrepancy between the two as a measure of the “principled abstainers.” In other words, if individuals say they are registered, this suggests that a key threshold to voting has been reached. While a number of reasons may ultimately blunt the taking of the second step, actual voting, it is unlikely to be apathy and far more likely to imply abstention based on “principle.” Census bureau data indicate that for each presidential election from 1976 through 1988 there is a slight but steady increase in the percentage of persons who report registering but not actually voting.

If one were to use formal education as an indicator of greater potential for principled abstention, then increases in the proportion of the population graduating high school and attending college might denote a different and more sophisticated character to nonvoters than heretofore acknowledged. Between 1960 and 1980, the college-educated proportion of the U. S. population increased by 11 percent, whereas presidential voting in the same period dropped by over 5 percent. While the rate of voting among those who have attended college is higher than among those who have not, over one in four are nonvoters. Whereas those with at least some college education comprised less than a fifth of the nonvoting electorate in 1976, by 1988 they were more than one-quarter of this population.

Most importantly, the revolt of the nonvoter is tied to the growing disjuncture between community and politics. The Kettering Foundation, in its 1990 round of local citizen *fora* and focus groups, concluded that the major reason for the crisis of American political life lay with the belief held by millions that they could no longer affect the system, particularly at a national level. Rather than apathy, what explained their attitude was a mood of political impotence. While addressing the issue of voting turnout, Kettering touched on a key sociological dynamic linked to political participation: attachment to community.

It is membership in a community and a sense of belonging (especially to local neighborhood and family structures) that is now seen as critical to who does or does not vote. Empirical studies suggest several definitive measures of individual attachment, rather than the hypothetical abstractions such as “sense of community” or “civic culture” that many political theorists cite as essential to political involvement. The emphasis here is upon specific networks of community—“voting as a community act.” This behavior is, in turn, correlated with belonging to voluntary local associations, including such diverse organizations as local crime watch groups, sports teams, or even organizing a bake sale. Declining neighborhood and family cohesion, coupled with high levels of geographic nomadism in American society, creates a very individuated, anomic, and essentially detached individual or nuclear family unit whose internalization of civic responsibility norms may be weak or absent.

Thus, despite a welter of theories regarding the role of institutional barriers to voting, lack of “political sophistication,” and the blandishments of mass media, what determines why Americans do or do not vote is unrelated to their wealth or poverty *per se*, but is instead linked to their having an intrin-

sically meaningful community bond. In turn, it is not clear which is the chicken and which the egg. For some, of course, this is good news, as it may suggest that the most cynical and alienated in society—those least willing to submit to a ritualistic fealty to either the Democratic or Republican parties—often stay outside the voting booth.



When the decision to vote or not to vote is an act of personal commitment whose rationale is not readily translated into a soundbite or multichoice checklist of the pollster, then we may feel more assured about our political system, regardless of the ebb and flow of its prevalence or direction. But if voting is merely the reflexive expression of a mass media-driven or ritualistic exercise in conformity to the rites of an “electronic community,” then its meaning is in doubt. It is when people decide to vote, even while believing the choices placed before them are unsatisfactory, and when both major parties vie for the ideological center of “swing voters,” that turnout statistics become highly ambiguous.

If voting is to serve as a meaningful act of *civitas*, a symbolic expression of community, then to abstain from it is to deny the legitimacy of politics. That voting and nonvoting are increasingly indistinguishable as acts of public rationality offers some glimpse at the moral crisis facing our society. That many individuals now appear to perceive their decision to vote as fraught with uncertainty as to its personal and social meaning bespeaks the potential for overcoming the conundrum.

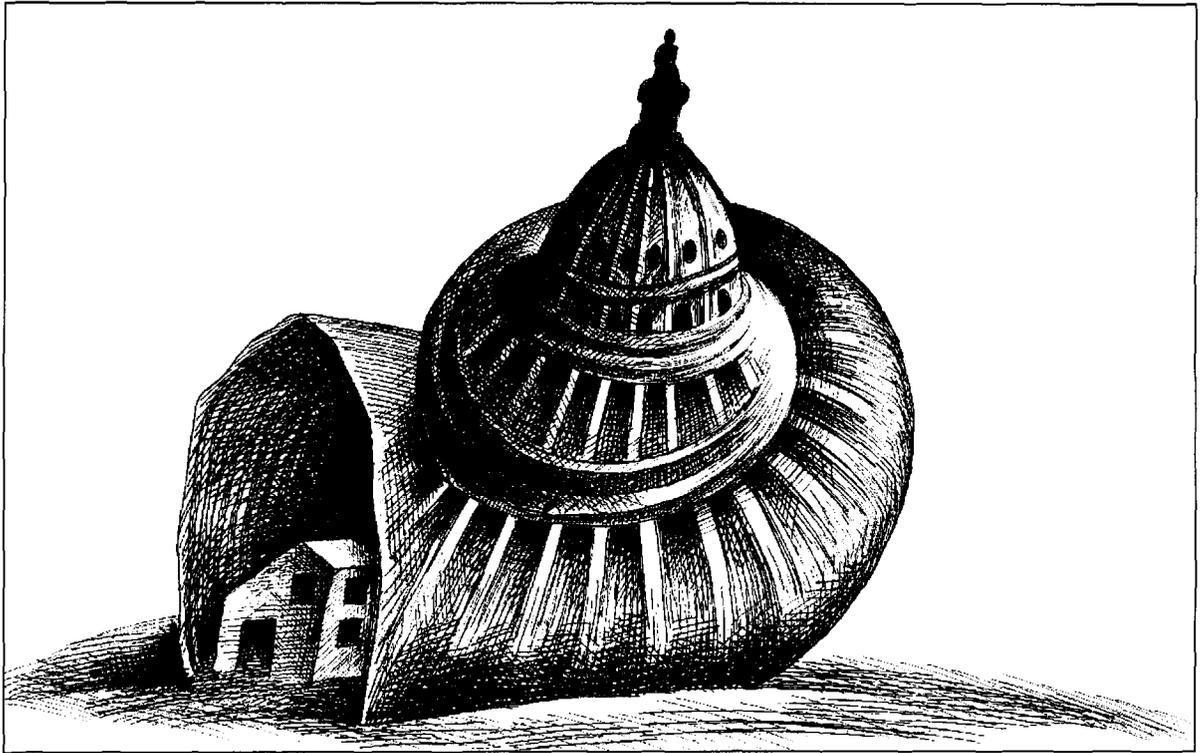
Voters and nonvoters alike are just statistical, bureaucratic categories—administrative bookkeeping devices. As long as politics continue to be confined to behaviors such as voting or contributing funds or volunteering to help a candidate get elected, for most citizens such acts will remain outside of their “real” lives. These acts are perhaps even interruptions of it, possibly distractions and often intrusions.

Unless political life is the extension of normal life by other means, it is bound to be the act of specialized minorities. This is what is implied by the fusion of voting with community. Without this link, individuals are left with the classical meaning of “alienation”—separation of the self from one’s activities. Where community is absent, genuine politics cannot flourish. Nonvoters are more likely to lack such social ties, but they may also be persons who *form a community of their own*: one who finds normative what those outside see as deviant. We must then ask, who has at one time not been drawn to that netherworld where politicians seem unable to offer trust, fail to speak in a language that is comprehensible, and where the act of voting seemed more irrational than rational?

Indeed, the core of this argument is that locating the fulcrum of political life within civic values and sense of community provides the most powerful explanation for the decline in voting observed in the past several decades. Consequently, whatever the result of this year’s election, almost certainly the choice made will be that of a minority of the electorate. This dynamic is a product of social forces that are not created by, but only reflected in, our nation’s polity. ◊

The Homeless Majority

by William J. Quirk



Igor Kopelnitsky

The middle-class revolt of 1992 is an angry rebellion against America's 25-year experiment with nondemocratic government. Around the mid-1960's, both political parties abandoned the average American, but for different reasons. The Democrats, taken with the high morality of the counter-culture, deserted him because their hearts turned against him; they decided he was selfish and racist. By 1972, the Democrats had become so exotic that the party ceased to have anything in common with him. The Republicans didn't either, but they were willing to say they did in exchange for middle-class votes. The Republicans, in fact, were willing to tell the middle class whatever it wanted to hear—all about patriotism, the work ethic, antiwelfare, anticrime, antiquotas, antibusing, "family values," and stopping the state's intrusion into the citizens' daily life, or, as it was put, "getting the government off the people's backs." The Republican rhetoric, however, was not followed by action.

As the government has stopped representing the people, the people have likewise stopped feeling any responsibility for the government. A government alienated from its people is afraid to ask its people for taxes. It knows it will be thrown out as soon as it asks the people for sacrifices. Unable to tax adequately to fund its programs, the government has to finance itself by borrowing, and then by borrowing some more.

As long ago as the infancy of our nation, however, Thomas

Jefferson recognized that debt is the power most dangerous to a democracy. It separates the spending from the cost that—as everyone with a credit card knows—makes all the difference in the world. Public debt, because it requires no immediate taxes, removes the critical limitation on democratic government—that to fund a program for the benefit of one group, the money has to be taken from another group.

Jefferson tried, in 1798, to amend the Constitution to prohibit the federal government from borrowing. He said he was "willing to depend on that [amendment] alone" to keep the administration of government in line with the principles of the Constitution. Debt violates the fundamental Jeffersonian premise that one generation cannot bind another. The legislature and the people acting together never have the right to legislate for the future, to bind down those who come after them, either by debt or by any other system of legislation that would prevent them from perfect freedom of action. Debt is essentially antidemocratic, because it restrains the freedom of future generations without their consent.

Jefferson believed that economic democracy is inseparable from political democracy. In a democracy you have to agree on what you want to do and on how to pay for it. A pay-as-you-go system demands immediate taxes to cover all spending. What the payees will currently receive the payers must currently pay; the payers are apt to resist, the issue must be discussed, and some compromise reached. With a borrowing policy, Jefferson said, the rules are entirely different. Debt, since it requires no immediate taxes, separates the recipient from the payer. The future taxpayer, who will pay, is not represented by any of the current parties. The burden is easily cast upon the unrepresented future.

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